



Mingo, Ozark Cavefish, and Pilot Knob

National Wildlife Refuges

Project Update

Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan

May 2005

State of the Plan

Together, more than a year ago, we launched the planning process for Mingo, Pilot Knob, and Ozark Cavefish National Wildlife Refuges. We heard from dozens of you on a wide range of topics. Our thanks go to everyone who attended a meeting, voiced a concern, or penned a comment. Your involvement is helping to shape the future of these Refuges, and we appreciate it. You gave us much to think about. Your comments strengthened our belief that refuges are important places where people and wildlife come together.

We expect the draft plan and environmental assessment to be available for public comment by late summer. It will contain more details, comparing and analyzing potential solutions. Until then, the following pages preview our work showing examples of how we used your comments, and the range of solutions we fashioned for issues you raised most often. Enjoy.

Public Lands and National Wildlife Refuges

In a nation rich with public lands, National Wildlife Refuges share the stage with a troupe of players. Federal, state, county, and local governments all administer public lands you probably know better as parks, forests, and recreation areas. Somewhat bewildering is that management of these lands often is guided by different policies, mandates, and objectives. Without a program it may be difficult to tell one player from another. Yet there are things that make National Wildlife Refuges unique, and they come into sharp focus whenever we engage the public in the planning process. Using Mingo as an example, let us take a closer look at the three words “National”, “Wildlife”, and “Refuge” to see how they explain its role within the larger system of public lands.



Bottomland Forest, Mingo NWR. USFWS

Right out of the gate “National” declares that Mingo belongs to all Americans regardless of where they live. We understand that those living nearby think of Mingo as their backyard and visit more often than those that live far away. Our challenge is to balance local demands with responsibilities and obligations that extend beyond the local area. This is the duty of the men and women of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, whether at Mingo or at any of the more than 540 National Wildlife Refuges across the country.

Ultimately, the role of refuges is defined by the American people through the President and Congress of the United States. Nothing sums up this role better than the word at the heart of our trio—“Wildlife”. We are proud to say that refuges are the only national lands managed primarily for wildlife. You may have heard the slogan “Wildlife First”. We use it to



Entrance Sign, Mingo NWR. USFWS

emphasize the unique and important role of these lands. Our charge is to do what is best for wildlife on each refuge, including Mingo. But this does not mean refuges are for wildlife only.

There are times when decisions for wildlife are unpopular with some of our visitors. There are many more times when refuges are a source of enjoyment—places where wildlife and people come together. We welcome you to discover all that refuges offer. Moreover, it is our obligation to extend that welcome beyond today to generations yet to come. This planning process is one way we meet that obligation. Weighing your comments and concerns along with our other responsibilities reminds us to carefully consider when, where, and how people use refuges as well as what types of habitats to emphasize. We believe this is the best way to keep refuges vital.



Spider Lily, Jim McCarty

That leads us to the anchor of the threesome—"Refuge". The term implies shelter and protection, and indeed refuges are intended to provide these things for wildlife.

But unless a species is very rare, to the point where every individual is critical to its continued existence, our focus is on maintaining healthy wildlife populations and the habitat that sustains them. No population remains the same; births and deaths ensure constant change. Our aim is to keep total numbers of wildlife in balance with the habitat that supports them so that they continue to thrive now and in the future.

Public ownership brings with it a diverse range of responsibilities. It is a challenge to balance the needs of wildlife with the desires of those that enjoy recreating on National Wildlife Refuges. But it is one that we welcome. Although we have guidance in the form of laws and national policies that help us meet this challenge, it really comes down to listening to your comments, weighing them carefully, and crafting solutions that work best for wildlife and people.

Vision and Goals

Visualizing the future helps realize it. The first step for us was crafting visions for each of the three Refuges that capture what we are trying to do and why the future will be different because of our efforts. The next challenge is making the vision real. The draft goals you see below flow from the vision and move us closer to more specific actions.

Mingo National Wildlife Refuge

Preamble

Mingo National Wildlife Refuge protects a remnant of the bottomland hardwood and cypress-tupelo swamp ecosystem which once formed a 2.5 million acre contiguous natural landscape throughout the Mississippi River basin. The 21,592-acre Refuge represents the largest area in southeast Missouri of remaining habitat for numerous native and threatened plant and animal species. The Refuge touches the southeast boundary of the Ozark Plateau and slopes abruptly from an upland oak-hickory forest to bottomland hardwood forest, lower marsh, and expansive swamp and ditch system. Since the beginning of the 20th century, these lands have been drained and deforested for agricultural purposes, which has highly modified the natural landscapes and ecosystem functions. Guided by legal mandates, the Refuge has successfully pioneered techniques that maintain a delicate balance of preservation and active management strategies for reforestation and hydrological integrity of the natural systems for the benefit of migratory birds, other wildlife, and wildlife dependent public use. The Refuge is located in a community that appreciates both the natural diversity and the rich biological integrity of the Refuge and the surrounding public and private lands that add to the core network of the natural landscape.



Bald Eagle, USFWS

Vision

Applying proven and innovative management practices, Refuge personnel will continue to ensure the protection of the Refuge ecosystems, including the preservation of the 7,730-acre Wilderness Area, designated in 1976. Intensive management of non-wilderness lands will utilize proactive strategies to maintain a high quality, sustainable, balanced, and highly diverse ecosystem. Proactive adaptive strategies will include traditional and accepted practices to protect the Refuge and surrounding lands from additional threats to the system, such as air quality and hydrological threats. The Refuge staff will continue to develop regeneration techniques and manage water levels to ensure the health and vitality of Refuge habitats.

Adaptive strategies will also assure continued protection and restoration of archeological and historic resources. Priority public-use opportunities will be provided and enhanced for the more than 100,000 annual visitors, in harmony with healthy habitats and sustainable wildlife populations.

This vision will be accomplished by continuing and expanding efforts to partner with state and federal agencies and the surrounding community, including neighboring landowners, stakeholders, supporters, and friends.

Goals

1. The Refuge will actively conserve a mosaic of upland and wetland habitats, including designated wilderness, through appropriate management strategies that preserve, protect, and enhance the vitality and health of the natural environment.
2. The Refuge will provide for a diversity of migratory birds and native fish and wildlife associated with healthy Refuge habitats and contributing to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

3. Provide a variety of wildlife dependent recreational and educational opportunities to allow the public to enjoy the resources of the Refuge and support the National Wildlife Refuge System.
4. Protect natural, cultural, and man-made resources and provide for the safety of staff, volunteers, and visitors to the extent feasible.
5. Preserve, protect, and enhance Refuge integrity and encourage conservation beyond Refuge boundaries.
6. Seek opportunities to obtain sufficient human resources and facilities through partner and agency funding mechanisms to achieve the goals and objectives of the CCP.

Pilot Knob National Wildlife Refuge

Vision

In cooperation with others, Pilot Knob National Wildlife Refuge will protect and maintain critical habitat that contributes to the recovery of the federally endangered Indiana Bat and Gray Bat. Visitors will enjoy scenic beauty and learn about the Refuge and the surrounding area in ways that are safe and that do no harm to the habitat or the bats that depend on it.

Goals

1. Contribute to the recovery of federally listed species and the conservation of their subterranean habitat on the Refuge.
2. Local residents and visitors are aware of the Refuge and its purpose.

Ozark Cavefish National Wildlife Refuge

Vision

In cooperation with others, Ozark Cavefish National Wildlife Refuge will contribute to the recovery of the federally threatened Ozark Cavefish and other subterranean species through habitat conservation, landowner education, and watershed protection within the Springfield Plateau.

Goals

1. Contribute to the recovery of federally listed species and the conservation of other subterranean species and their habitats within the Springfield Plateau.
2. Landowners in the recharge area of Turnback Cave apply best management practices to maintain water quality.

Alternative Summaries

The following tables list issues mentioned most often along with alternative ways we might address them. Greater detail will be available in the draft plan and environmental assessment.

Table 1: Mingo NWR Summary of Alternatives

Issue	Alternative 1 Theme: Current Management Direction	Alternative 2 Theme: Expand opportunities for the public
Hunting	Continue to offer seasonal hunts for squirrel, deer/turkey (archery), muzzleloader deer, waterfowl, spring youth turkey, turkey, and opportunities for persons with disabilities.	Offer all hunting opportunities described under Alternative 1, as well as expand the area or length of some seasons, during specified times open Pool 8 to all interested waterfowl hunters, and offer more opportunities for women, youth, terminally ill children, and persons with disabilities.
Fishing	Continue to offer fishing opportunities consistent with State regulations. Monitor sport fish populations and restock when appropriate.	Offer all fishing opportunities described under Alternative 1, as well as construct additional open water habitat, provide accessible fishing piers, add bank fishing access, and install fish structures.
Wildlife Observation and Photography	Continue to offer wildlife observation and photography on the Refuge including a seasonal Auto Tour Route and several observation sites with some that are fully accessible.	Expand opportunities for wildlife observation and photography by extending the seasonal length of the Auto Tour Route, adding observation blinds, installing a webcam, and improving access by adding parking lots and foot bridges.
Environmental Education and Interpretation	Continue to offer existing environmental education and interpretation programs and facilities including operation of the Visitor Center, and programs for youth groups and schools.	Expand the environmental education and interpretation programs and facilities by opening the Visitor Center on weekends from March to November, upgrading exhibits, improving and expanding interpretive information throughout the Refuge, and working in partnership with schools, youth groups, and other organizations.
Equestrian Use	Continue to offer equestrian use on roads open to vehicular traffic and on the Auto Tour Route year round.	In addition to what is described for Alternative 1, increase access to other portions of the Refuge.
Ditch System	Periodically remove sediment and maintain water control structures on the portion of the ditch system (approximately 10 miles) that allows for water level management of Green Tree Reservoirs (Pools 5, 7, and 8) and Moist Soil Units.	Remove sediment from about 34 miles of the ditch system over the next 10 years. Once complete, monitor and maintain the ditch system and water control structures to ensure drainage and water movement across the entire Refuge.
Open Fields and Farm Units	Maintain the existing amount of open fields and farm units.	Maintain the existing amount of open fields and farm units.
Forest	Maintain 15,000 acres of bottomland hardwoods including three Green Tree Reservoirs that would be flooded no more than 130 consecutive days between November and March.	Maintain 15,000 acres of bottomland hardwoods including three Green Tree Reservoirs that would be flooded no more than 130 consecutive days between November and March.

Alternative 3

Theme: Expand habitat management and reduce visitor conflicts

Offer fewer hunting opportunities than described under Alternative 1. Hunting would include firearm seasons for spring turkey and youth turkey as well as fall archery seasons for deer and turkey.

Offer all fishing opportunities described under Alternative 1, except for bow fishing. Install fish structures in ditches and ponds. Reintroduce alligator gar in Refuge streams and ditches.

Focus wildlife observation and photography opportunities on fewer sites than are presently available.

Continue to offer existing environmental education and interpretation facilities such as the Visitor Center, exhibits, brochures, and waysides. Shift environmental education programming to Mingo Swamp Friends and other conservation organizations.

Offer less equestrian use than is currently available. Equestrian use would be limited to the Auto Tour Route during times it is closed to vehicular traffic.

Remove sediment from about 34 miles of the ditch system over the next 10 years. Once complete, monitor and maintain the ditch system and water control structures to ensure drainage and water movement across the entire Refuge.

Allow all open fields and farm units to revert to young forested habitat favored by deer, turkey, quail, and swamp rabbits. Over time allow all of these areas to grow into mature bottomland forest.

Restore 225 acres of open marsh to bottomland forest and maintain 15,000 acres of existing bottomland forest including three Green Tree Reservoirs that would be flooded no more than 130 consecutive days between November and March.

Alternative 4

Theme: Expand public opportunities and expand habitat management

Offer all hunting opportunities described under Alternative 1, as well as host participants of MDC's Spring Turkey Women's Outdoor Skills Event within the Public Hunting Area. Co-sponsor a fall youth firearms deer hunt within a portion of the Public Hunting Area. During specified times open Pool 8 to all interested hunters during waterfowl season.

Offer all fishing opportunities described under Alternative 1, except for bow fishing. Also, construct additional open water habitat, provide accessible fishing piers, add bank fishing access, and install fish structures. Reintroduce alligator gar in Refuge streams and ditches.

Expand opportunities for wildlife observation and photography by extending the distance and seasonal length of the Auto Tour Route, adding observation blinds, and installing a webcam.

Expand the environmental education and interpretation programs and facilities by opening the Visitor Center on weekends from March to November, upgrading exhibits, improving and expanding interpretive information throughout the Refuge, and working in partnership with Mingo Swamp Friends, schools, youth groups, and other organizations.

In addition to what is described for Alternative 1, offer seasonal equestrian access to Ditch 3 Road, Ditch 4 Road, and Sand Blow Ridge Road.

Remove sediment from about 34 miles of the ditch system over the next 10 years. Once complete, monitor and maintain the ditch system and water control structures to ensure drainage and water movement across the entire Refuge.

Maintain some open fields and cropland, but less than currently exists. Allow some to revert to younger habitats favored by deer, turkey, quail, and swamp rabbits. Over time maintain some of these areas in younger habitats and allow others to grow into mature bottomland forest.

Restore 225 acres of open marsh to bottomland forest and maintain 15,000 acres of existing bottomland forest including three Green Tree Reservoirs that would be flooded no more than 130 consecutive days between November and March.

Table 2: Pilot Knob NWR Summary of Alternatives

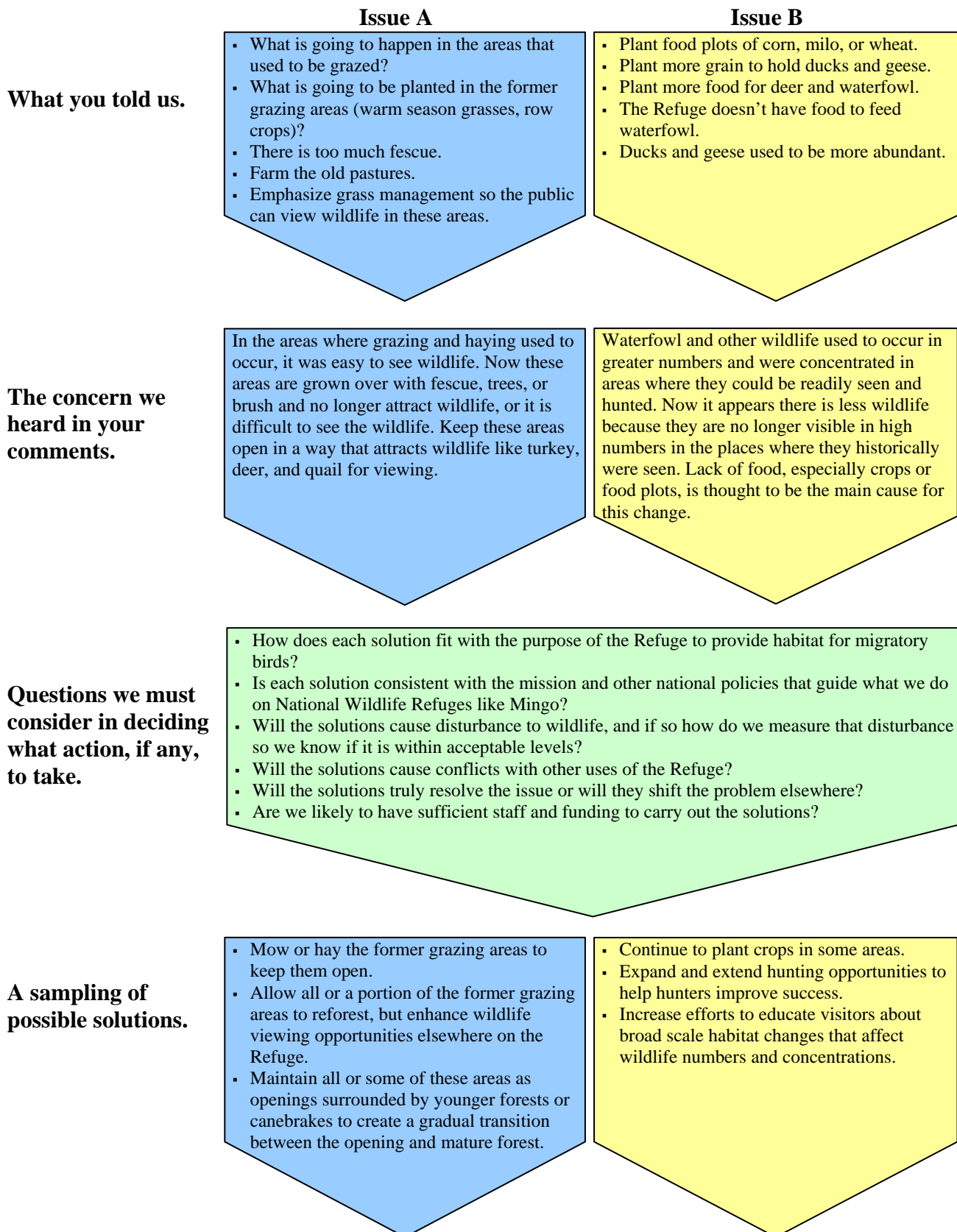
Issue	Alternative 1 Theme: Current Management Direction	Alternative 2 Theme: Expand opportunities for the public and protect endangered species
Endangered Species Protection	Repair fencing and maintain boundary signs.	Repair fencing and maintain boundary signs. Increase law enforcement presence. Enlist the community to help monitor activities on the Refuge.
Public Access and Visitor Services	Limit public access to specific authorized visits associated with research, education, or historic interpretation.	Offer periodic guided public access to the Refuge during daylight hours to provide for visitor safety and avoid conflicts with Indiana bats. Develop a local Friends group to communicate information about the Refuge within area communities. Develop a Refuge brochure.

Table 3: Ozark Cavefish NWR Summary of Alternatives

Issue	Alternative 1 Theme: Current Management Direction	Alternative 2 Theme: Expand species protection and opportunities for the public
Endangered Species Protection	Provide protection to the surface outlet of Turnback Creek and Hearrell Springs.	Provide protection to the surface outlet of Turnback Creek. Work with surrounding landowners to improve and maintain water quality within the recharge area for Turnback Creek.
Public Access and Visitor Services	Prohibit public access.	Offer opportunities for the public to engage in compatible wildlife dependent public uses. Develop a partnership with the Missouri Department of Conservation to share public use management and oversight. Install kiosks with interpretive information.
Habitat Management	No active habitat management.	Assess existing resources and begin work on habitat restoration.

Issue Development

Below you can follow the development of two issues and get an idea of how we used your comments in crafting possible solutions during the planning process.



What's Next?

We expect the draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan, highlighting our preferred alternative, and the associated environmental assessment, comparing and analyzing all of the alternatives, to be ready by late summer. We will let you know when the document is available for public review and comment. Until then feel free to forward your comments on the preview of the alternatives contained in this newsletter.



Stanley Creek, USFWS

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